

Assignment One - The Celts Origins to Modern Era (HPCS7003) – Heidi Wyldewood (2110492)

Under what circumstances can 'Celtic' be considered an appropriate label for the Britons, Gaels and Picts of early medieval Britain and Ireland?

According to the dictionary, the term Celtic commonly refers to the 'Celts or their languages'.¹ The living Celtic languages are all regional minority languages: Welsh, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx, Cornish and Breton.² The term Celts, however, historically pertains to an iron-age people living in continental Europe, not the British Isles and Ireland.³ Clearly then, 'Celts' and 'Celtic' do not necessarily belong to the same group of people. The definition of Celtic appears to be a broader umbrella than the tribe(s) who originally inspired it, a term under which there is less restriction or differentiation regarding time, place and people. Therefore, the question is rightly asked whether Celtic is an appropriate descriptor for people living in a different time and place to the continental Celts, such as those living in Britain and Ireland in the Middle Ages. The evidence, both historically and archaeologically, is limited between the fifth and tenth century and the available, but not always unbiased, written sources are the *Historia Brittonum*; *Annales Cambriae*; *Annals of Ulster*; the writings of Gildas and Bede; Anglo-Saxon Chronicles; hagiographies; penitential lists; and genealogies.⁴ The attribution of Celtic as a linguistic, sociocultural or ethno-political label when discussing the early medieval Britons, Gaels and Picts is examined in light of the relevant evidence here. Under which circumstances, if any, is it logical, useful or apt to use Celtic? Introduced first are the individual groups of people as historically or archaeologically attested between the end of the Roman occupation of Britain and the tenth century. This provides the necessary foundation on which to examine the term Celtic and for an analysis of its use in the following contexts: language, culture and identity.

The Britons emerged into the historic record when Greek writers stopped using the word Albions to describe the inhabitants of 'insular Albionum' and used Britain, Briton and British instead.⁵ The Romans subsequently used Latin forms of the same, 'Britannia, Britannus and Britannicus', but all these terms are geographical identifiers rather than 'cultural or political designations'.⁶ It is not easy to determine whether these terms belonged to the islanders themselves, because *Albiones* appears to have been part of the insular vocabulary, possibly from as early as the Bronze Age.⁷ However, the insular word used by Britons in the middle ages for the Picts is *Priteni* and the Welsh word for Britain is *Prydein*, which bear respective similarities to *Britanni* and Britain, so it is possible that 'Briton' was a self-labelled term for some of the inhabitants of Britain during the pre-Roman Bronze and Iron Ages.⁸ During the early Roman occupation of Britain, the Britons largely retained their individual tribal designations, albeit adapted and utilised within the Roman administrative system.⁹ By the time of the Roman withdrawal any sense of native sovereignty was only present in the western and northern peripheries.¹⁰ Britons is the collective term for non-Romans in occupied Britain during this time, although it is important to note that the furthest northern extent of Roman reach ended at Hadrian's

¹ Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 'Celtic', *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2026), <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Celtic>> [accessed 23rd February 2026].

² Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 129-130.

³ Ibid., pp. 8-17 and 139-140.

⁴ Christopher A. Snyder, *The Britons* (Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 76-77.

⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 34-36.

¹⁰ John Davies, *A History Of Wales* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1993), p. 48. See also Snyder, *The Britons*, pp. 47-48.

Wall, and then temporarily at the Antoine Wall between the Firth of the Clyde and the Firth of the Forth, and with it the label of Britons.¹¹ When the Roman civic and military organisation of Britain declined in the early fifth century, the indigenous population eventually faced incursions from Germanic peoples.¹² Initially it was just the Saxons who came, but Bede and Gildas confirm that Angles, Jutes and Saxons arrived in numbers, and that the remaining Britons in highly Romanised areas were pushed west.¹³ The newly established self-governances in the resistant, less Romanised peripheries fought back, and their struggle for reassertion and retention of control characterised the early medieval landscape. At the onset of this period, where several generations had been born under Roman rule, people identified either as Roman, possibly as Britons, or perhaps both, depending on how Romanised their region was.¹⁴ The Britons were essentially the indigenous population living in the entire island of Britain south of the wall. By the ninth century, because of the hold the Anglo-Saxons gained over the rest of the country, one kingdom of Yr Hen Oggled (The Old North) called Ystrad Clud (Strathclyde); Dumnonia (Cornwall and Devon) in the southwest, and those kingdoms within Cymru (Wales) became the remaining regions of the Britons, separate from each other.¹⁵

According to the *Historia Brittonum* the inhabitants of the 'island of Britain' during the early Middle Ages were 'four different people; the Scots, the Picts, the Saxons and the ancient Britons'.¹⁶ The earliest mention of the Picts was in the late third century AD in a Latin panegyric.¹⁷ More commonly the peoples living in the northern most parts of Britain had been referred to as *Caledonii* by the Romans, despite there being more tribes than just the prominent central Highland group.¹⁸ By the fifth century both names, *Caledonii* and *Picti* were being used to describe those 'outside Roman control in Britain'.¹⁹ *Prydyn/Priteni* (Brythonic) and *Cruithin* (Gaelic) were the names used by the Britons and the Irish for the Picts.²⁰ Essentially, the Picts of the early middle ages were part of the indigenous population of Britain, cut off from the rest of the British or Brythonic continuum by the Roman occupation and wall.²¹ They left no written records behind apart from a king-list, of which the earliest extant form is from the fourteenth century.²² The list was begun c. 660-720 AD and the contemporary record kept until the mid to late eighth century.²³ Some of the names are verified from

¹¹ Snyder, *The Britons*, pp. 46-47.

¹² *Historia Brittonum*, trans. by J. A. Giles (2006), 43 and 50 <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1972/1972-h/1972-h.htm>> [accessed 4th March 2026].

¹³ Snyder, *The Britons*, pp. 84-86.

¹⁴ John Collis, *Royal Archaeological Institute: Celts And The End Of Roman Britain* [video]. 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wp4buixpvM>> [accessed 28th February 2026].

¹⁵ Cornwall was not partially incorporated into England until the beginning of the ninth century; Strathclyde was annexed into the emerging Scotland in the eleventh century; and Wales held off the Normans until the late thirteenth century, but throughout the early medieval era these areas of Britain, although separated from each other remained Brythonic speaking. Their languages developed into Cornish, Welsh and Cumbric respectively. For Cornwall, see Simon Ó Faoláin, 'Dumnonia', *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006) pp. 619-621 (p.619). For Strathclyde, see John T. Koch, 'Scots/Scotti', *Celtic Culture*, pp. 1571-1572 (p.1571). Also see Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Ystrad Clud', *Celtic Culture*, pp. 1818-1821 (p.1818). For the Anglo-Saxon expansion in Britain during the sixth to ninth century, see John T. Koch, 'Anglo-Saxon 'Conquest'', *Celtic Culture*, pp. 58-61 (p.60).

¹⁶ *Historia Brittonum*, 7.

¹⁷ Benjamin Hudson, *The Picts*, (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2014), p. 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Katherine Forsyth, 'Picts', *Celtic Culture*, pp. 1446-1448 (p.1447).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p.1443.

²³ *Ibid.*

other sources, such as the *Annals of Ulster*, but others are legendary.²⁴ A 'pre-historic section' appears to preserve names remembered as part of an oral tradition, but there is uncertainty surrounding this 'ancient line of kings' and it is conceivably a later 'political construct'.²⁵ The Picts began to shape their identity as non-Roman in earlier centuries, but this 'construct' was extended and consciously promoted as different to that of Britons, during the early medieval period.²⁶ Christianisation of Pictland began in earnest towards the end of the sixth century, and by the end of the seventh the church had replaced paganism.²⁷ Apart from archaeological traces and mentions of them in Welsh and Irish literature, the Picts remain somewhat elusive, and the symbols they carved into stone adds to the mystery.²⁸

The term Gael is derived from a self-designated term for the Irish, *Goídel*, which is a borrowing from Brythonic originally.²⁹ Scot or *Scotti* is also used to refer to the same people.³⁰ The arrival of the Irish (Gael), into the area of Scotland known as Argyllshire, was described in the Irish version of the *Historia Brittonum*; 'the Dalriada came, and took the district of the Cruithnians', around the same time the 'Saxons took their portion of the island from the Britons.'³¹ The first appearance of the term 'Dál Riata' in occurs c. 620 AD in connection with a people in north-east Ireland.³² The second reference to them announces that 'The Dál Riata despoiled the Cruithin and the Ulaid'³³ Bede states that the Scots arrived on the north side of the large gulf that 'runs from the west far into the land' and 'settled there', meaning the north of the Clyde.³⁴ In addition to the Dál Riata, who maintained their presence both sides of the Irish Sea, significant Irish settlement, trade and ecclesiastical interaction in Cornwall and Wales is substantiated from the fifth to sixth century onward.³⁵ Irish activity in Britain during the early medieval period is most evident via their Ogham script and names carved into stones.³⁶ Although there is a southern distribution bias for the three hundred and sixty Ogham stones

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Sally M. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots: Early Historic Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2014), p. xviii.

²⁷ Forsyth, 'Picts', *Celtic Culture*, p.1447.

²⁸ Pictish houses, fortifications and burials have been identified by archaeologists. The distinct motifs and symbols carved into stone is the 'closest of any distribution to defining a territory that from the seventh century is claimed as Pictish'. D. W. Harding, *Rewriting History: Changing Perceptions Of The Archaeological Past*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 222 and 231-232.

²⁹ Karl Horst Schmidt, 'Insular Celtic: P And Q Celtic*', *The Celtic Languages*, ed. by Martin J. Ball with James Fife (USA and Canada: Routledge, 1993), pp. 64-98 (p. 67).

³⁰ Scot is used by Bede in Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*, rev. trans. by A. M. Sellar (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907), pp. 7-8 (Book 1. Chap.1). *Scotti* is used in Koch's translation of the *Historia Brittonum*, John T. Koch, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources For Ancient Celtic Europe And Early Ireland And Wales*, ed. by John T. Koch and John Carey (Massachusetts, US: Celtic Studies Publication, 1995), p. 272.

³¹ The Irish version of the *Historia Brittonum* states: 'In the same age the Cruithnians took the northern quarter of the island of Britain. But it was in the sixth age that the Dalriada came, and took the district of the Cruithnians, and it was at that time *also* that the Saxons took their portion of the island from the Britons.' CELT: Corpus Of Electronic Texts 'The Irish version of the *Historia Brittonum* of Nennius', *CELT: Corpus Of Electronic Texts* (2020) < <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100028.html> > [accessed 7th March 2026].

³² Russell Ó Riagáin, 'Becoming Dál Riata: A Critical Evaluation Of The Emergence Of An Early Medieval Insular Polity', *Scottish Historical Review*, 103.1 (2024) 1-76 (p. 9) <<https://doi.org/10.3366/shr.2024.0647>> [accessed 4th March 2026].

³³ 'Dal Riati populati sunt Cruithniu 7 Ultu' is found in the *Annals of Ulster*, 153. Ó Riagáin, 'Becoming Dál Riata: p. 67.

³⁴ Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*, pp. 7-8 (Book 1. Chap.1).

³⁵ Snyder, *The Britons*, pp. 70 and 162-163.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 162. The ogham alphabet is comprised of twenty characters made up of one to five scores or lines to the right, left or diagonally across a stem line. Muiris O'Sullivan and Liam Downey, 'Ogham Stones',

found in Ireland, nearly fifty British examples have been found in Wales, Scotland, Isle of Man and Cornwall from the period of Roman decline onward.³⁷ The west of Britain, north to south, was home to pockets of Irish settlers, whereas the Dál Riata was a full kingdom. In the tenth century the term Gŵyðyl was used in the Welsh prophecy, *Armes Prydein*, to designate the Irish groups in both countries: Gŵyðyl Iwerðon (Gaels of Ireland) and the Gŵyðyl Prydyn (Gaels of Britain).³⁸

Pictish and Gaelic societies were originally organised similarly, with regional clans and kings. The Dál Riata appear to have had two to four kindred groups, with one dominant lineage, maintaining a 'narrower range of kingship' for royal succession than was normal in Ireland.³⁹ The Picts increasingly moved away from petty kingdoms in the fifth century towards a 'centralisation of authority' in the ninth.⁴⁰ When the 'heirs of the late Roman provincial administrative system' and other members of aristocracy jostled to reestablish order, the outcome, by the sixth century onwards, was also territorial rulers or kings in the Brythonic speaking areas south of the wall.⁴¹ These early medieval rulers, of all three groups, maintained a 'monopoly of exotic or rare goods', then within their domain a system of 'vertical transactions' implemented the flow of prestige goods downward and food and services, including labour and military, upward.⁴² The top down approach defined the chain of relationships and levels of social standing that afforded 'protection and patronage' from king to lord to farm.⁴³ Power was maintained and exchanged through 'agreed modes inheritance and/or aggression', and authority was linked to the number and type of relationships one could support, which is ultimately dependant on agricultural resources.⁴⁴ In the days of the very early church, when the majority of Anglo-Saxons were still pagans, Christianity could be regarded as a socially unifying factor for the Gaels, Picts, and Britons. However, by the early eighth century, when talking about the languages that separated people all over Britain, Bede describes Latin as 'common to all by the study of the Scriptures', including those who spoke English.⁴⁵

It was some of those languages that Bede spoke of, British, Scottish and Pictish, that originally led to the modern use of the term Celtic. The links between their evolved modern versions into Welsh and Scottish Gaelic, along with Irish, Manx, Breton and Cornish were gradually pieced together in the seventeenth century by Abbé Paul-Yves Pezron, who made the link between the language of the Gauls (Continental Celts) with Breton and Welsh, and, Edward Lhuyd, who put the relationship of P-Celtic (Brythonic) and Q-Celtic (Goidelic) together and was the first person to use the term Celtic to

Archaeology Ireland, 28.2 (2014), 26-29 (p. 26) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23771305>> [accessed 10th March 2026].

³⁷ Muiris O'Sullivan and Liam Downey, 'Ogham Stones', *Archaeology Ireland*, 28.2 (2014), 26-29 (p. 27) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23771305>> [accessed 10th March 2026].

³⁸ John Koch, Celts, Britons, and Gaels - Names, Peoples, and Identities', *Transactions Of The Honourable Society Of Cymmrodorion*, 9 (2003) 41-56 (p. 56).

³⁹ The Dál Riata originally maintained two royal groups in Scotland, but appear to have added two non-royal ones later. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*, pp. 33 and 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴¹ Wendy Davies, *Patterns Of Power In Early Wales: O'Donnell Lectures Delivered In The University Of Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 33-34.

⁴² Stephen Taffe Driscoll, *The Early Historic Landscape Of Strathearn: The Archaeology Of A Pictish Kingdom*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 1987), p. 145.

⁴³ Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*, pp. 33-35.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ 'There are in the island at present, following the number of the books in which the Divine Law was written, five languages of different nations employed in the study and confession of the one self-same knowledge, which is of highest truth and true sublimity, to wit, English, British, Scottish, Pictish, and Latin, the last having become common to all by the study of the Scriptures.' ⁴⁵ Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*, p. 6 (Book 1. Chap.1).

describe the languages as a whole connected group.⁴⁶ The Celtic continental languages are no longer spoken, but the living languages belong to the Brythonic branch: Welsh, Breton and Cornish; and the Goidelic branch: Irish, Manx and Scots Gaelic.⁴⁷ The name given to the Picts by the Britons, *Prydyn*, and by the Irish, *Cruithin*, is an example of the Brythonic-Goidelic P and Q split, with the *q* giving way to *c/k* by the seventh to tenth century.⁴⁸ The Ogham stones preserve the oldest form of Goidelic.⁴⁹ Pictish is understood to be a Brythonic language, due to the many Brythonic place names in Scotland, but it died out after the fall of the last Pictish kingdom in the ninth century.⁵⁰ Linguistic innovations within the separate areas of Brythonic speakers during the early medieval era meant their languages were slowly separating.⁵¹ This included Cumbric, spoken in the Strathclyde area, which died out when the area was annexed into the newly formed Scotland.⁵²

Just as the languages of the Britons, Gaels and Picts display areas of relatedness but are distinct from each other, so too the material culture and stories their speakers left behind. It is both the differences and the similarities that make using Celtic problematic here. For example, whilst Pictish could be used to describe some archaeological features it doesn't work for the distribution of sites, settlements, souterrains, forts, burials.⁵³ So are they then Celtic, rather than Pictish? Conversely, the visual art styles of the Highlands and Scottish Isles which survived in 'sinuous lines on metalwork' between the age of early rock art to the Middle Ages, did emerge as unique 'independent works of art' on the Pictish carved stones.⁵⁴ The earliest Class I stones date to the late fifth and sixth centuries.⁵⁵ Whilst most of the Pictish artwork is found in the east of Scotland as to be expected, there are 'highly significant' examples of these stones in the Highlands.⁵⁶ This indicates that although Gaelic speakers effected 'linguistic change' in the Highlands, the Picts remained a 'cultural presence' throughout the same period, their distinctive visual art style consequently influencing Highland Gaelic art.⁵⁷ The Gaelic Book of Durrow contains specific references to Pictish motifs.⁵⁸ The Class II stones from the late sixth and early seventh century to the ninth century bear the Gaelic influence of geometric patterns and interlacing which 'characterises the illuminated manuscripts' of Iona and Lindisfarne.⁵⁹ However, despite being inspired by Gaelic artwork, the Picts adopted the Roman 'ecclesiastical customs' not

⁴⁶ Prys Morgan, 'Pezron, Abbé Paul-Yves', *Celtic Culture*, pp. 1441 (p.1441). For Edward Lhuyd, see Brynley F. Roberts, 'Lhuyd, Edward', *Celtic Culture*, pp. 1152-1153 (p.1153).

⁴⁷ Stefan Zimmer, 'Celtic Languages', *Celtic Culture*, pp. 371-375 (p.373).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.374.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.373.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See also James Fife, 'Historical Aspects: Introduction', *The Celtic Languages*, ed. by Martin J. Ball with James Fife (USA and Canada: Routledge, 1993), pp. 3-25 (p. 6).

⁵¹ Fife, 'Historical Aspects: Introduction', p. 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ So called Pictish brochs are found beyond eastern and southern Scotland, and are 'from the second half of the first millennium BC', well before the Picts became a distinct group. Souterrains labelled Pictish, because they are in the right area, are archaeologically the same as those found elsewhere in Scotland and the islands, and the rest of Britain. Harding, *Rewriting History*, pp. 225, 230 and 239.

⁵⁴ Murdo Macdonald, 'Towards An Exhibition Of Highland Art', *International Journal Of Heritage Studies*, 15.2-3 (2009), pp. 163-174 (pp. 168-169) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250902890647>> [accessed 27th February 2026].

⁵⁵ Irene Hughson, 'Horses In The Early Historic Period: Evidence From The Pictish Sculptured Stones', *The Horse In Celtic Culture: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*, ed. by Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), pp. 23-42 (pp. 23-25).

⁵⁶ Macdonald, 'Towards An Exhibition Of Highland Art', p. 169.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Hughson, 'Horses In The Early Historic Period', p. 25. For Iona and Lindisfarne, see Macdonald, 'Towards An Exhibition Of Highland Art', pp. 169-170.

those of the Irish.⁶⁰ Using Celtic with regard to art in Scotland during this time is not adequate to represent the subtle developments between Gaelic and Pictish and the marked differences. Describing 'knotwork' as Celtic is only satisfactory with respect to various visible threads seen in earlier British, Irish and European art, but it does not convey the evolution and perfection of the style in the Gaelic monasteries of the Gaidhealtachd from the seventh century onward.⁶¹

As evidenced by the unique Ogham stones used as markers for sacred places, burials, land boundaries and titles, Gaelic influence was not restricted to Britain north of the wall.⁶² Britons in Cornwall started producing a particular type of pottery c. 500 AD that appears to be influenced by Irish contact around the same time that Irish saints began to be honoured in west Cornwall.⁶³ Found too in sites on both sides of the Irish Sea are technological developments in the form of lidded crucibles for metal working, and millefiori and enamel work in Dinas Powys demonstrate a level of mastery similar to Irish work.⁶⁴ These people travelled, traded, innovated, and learned from each other, pre, during and post the Roman occupation. However, although some Irish scholars are found in Wales during the ninth and tenth century, there was very 'little literary traffic between Ireland and Wales' via the vernacular in the early Middle Ages, and the cognate 'gods and heroes' and shared themes in their respective mythologies probably indicate a commonality stemming from an 'early pre-textual stage' and a pre-Christian stage.⁶⁵ It is possible that the ecclesiastical route is responsible for Irish influence on Welsh manuscripts from the high to late Middle Ages, but it may only have enhanced or added specifics to any similarities that were already present. Later borrowings may account for themes, such as honour and sovereignty, which reoccur in both Irish and Welsh tales, but some of these tales refer to early medieval characters and their societal structures reveal early importance of such themes.⁶⁶ Additionally, a chess-like game linked to representations of sovereignty in these tales has been confirmed as a real social pastime by archaeologists.⁶⁷ Examples of early medieval gaming pieces and boards for *fidchell* (Irish) and *gwyddbwyll* (Welsh) have been found in Ireland and Britain and the etymology in both languages pre-dates the medieval era.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Robert Bartlett, 'Heartland And Border: The Mental And Physical Geography Of Medieval Europe', *Power And Identity In The Middle Ages: Essays In Memory Of Rees Davies*, ed. by Huw Price and John Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 23-36 (p. 25).

⁶¹ Macdonald, 'Towards An Exhibition Of Highland Art', p. 171.

⁶² O'Sullivan and Downey, 'Ogham Stones', p. 28.

⁶³ Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain: History And Archaeology AD 367-764* (London and New York: Penguin Group, 1989), pp. 200-201.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 234-236.

⁶⁵ Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence On Medieval Welsh Literature*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 334. For the cognate 'gods and heroes', see Anne Ross, *Folklore Of Wales*, 3rd edn. (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2025), eBook format: chapter 2: Folk Narrative.

⁶⁶ For an analysis of honour, insult and status appearing Irish and Welsh tales, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Honour And Status In Some Irish And Welsh Prose Tales', *Ériu*, 29 (1978), 123-141 (pp. 123 and 140-141) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30007769>> [accessed 2nd March 2026]. For the tale *Fingal Rónáin* containing the pursuit of the daughter of Echaíd, king of Dál Riata, by Rónáin, King of Leinster, see pp. 130-131. For themes of sovereignty, including goddesses of war and kingship, in Irish and British mythologies, see Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Celtic Goddesses Of Sovereignty', *Goddesses Who Rule*, ed. by Elizabeth Benard and Beverly Moon (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 85-99 (pp. 86 and 92).

⁶⁷ For the game's connections with Irish and Welsh tales of sovereignty, see Lauren Dye, 'The Game Of Sovereignty', *Proceedings Of The Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 18/19 (1998/1999), 34-41 (p. 34-38) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20557334>> [accessed 28th February 2026].

⁶⁸ Mark A. Hall and Katherine Forsyth, 'Roman Rules? The Introduction Of Board Games To Britain And Ireland', *Antiquity*, 85. 330 (2011) 1325-1338 (pp. 1328 and 1331-1332) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00062086>> [accessed 2nd March 2026].

Tempting too as it might be to also see a shared meaning beyond logical importance between some of the Pictish carvings, such as those of salmon or horses, with mythological themes preserved later in Welsh manuscripts, symbolic coherence between Picts and Britons prior to or after Roman interference cannot be assumed.⁶⁹ Horses were highly valued in many early historic societies and trading was common between different communities prior to the Norman invasion, with British horses logged in Irish records.⁷⁰ The four branches of the Mabinogi, oral tales which 'evolved over centuries' long before their composed form, reinforce the significance of the horse for an earlier time and the second branch specifically contains scenes based on such trade between Britain and Ireland.⁷¹ This adds to the understanding of why depictions of Pictish horses are based on the stock they carefully bred and prized, but this is far from confirmation of a shared folklore.⁷² For the Britons and Gaels, the salmon may have been a creature of wisdom as depicted in Welsh and Irish mythologies, but for the Picts it may have represented a highly valued food source with a different meaning given to the carvings.⁷³

Cultural overlap certainly exists but is often minimal or limited to geographical areas or in the realm of survival common to all humanity. In all the instances of cultural similarity, Celtic could be used to describe art styles, technical innovations, overarching mythological themes, cognate archetypes, or even the version of a board game, but again it does not acknowledge points of departure and uniqueness, or the areas in Britain where similarities did not exist. The Pictish stones and the Irish Ogham stones are not the same. Early Christianity for a time belonged with the Britons, Gaels and Picts, but soon became part of Anglo-Saxon Britain too. Furthermore, there were differences in the traditions of Christianity between the three groups that deem 'Celtic Church' a problematic label. Welsh and Irish mythology, although not written down till after, undoubtedly bore certain similarities during the early medieval era, but they are still very different to each other and do not necessarily represent all areas of Celtic speakers. British and Irish art and material culture are surely better served by the term Insular, thereby separating it from Celtic Continental art and artifacts.⁷⁴ Better still is to differentiate further. Celtic only works at a basic level of comparison, in the same way 'Aboriginal' art is a coverall, because both are broader homogenous terms, neither of which do justice to the

⁶⁹ Gwilym Morus-Baird, *Celtic Source: Battle Scars & Sacred Stars: The Story Of The Picts* [video]. 2025 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTFMpcxSJsM>> [accessed 28th February 2026].

⁷⁰ Irene Hughson, 'Pictish Horse Carvings', *Glasgow Archaeological Journal*, 17.1, (1991), 53-62 (p. 53) <<https://doi.org/10.3366/gas.1991.17.17.53>> [accessed 28th February 2026]. For horse trade prior to Norman invasion, see Sioned Davies, 'Horses In The Mabinogion', *The Horse In Celtic Culture: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*, ed. by Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), pp. 121-140 (p. 136).

⁷¹ For the Mabinogi and associated tales 'which evolved over centuries' and were preserved via oral tradition prior to their current form c. late eleventh or twelfth century (the extant manuscripts are dated between 1382 and c. 1410), see Sioned Davies, 'Introduction', *The Mabinogion*, trans. by Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. ix, xiii and xvii. For the significance of the horse in the Mabinogi, see Davies, 'Horses In The Mabinogion', pp. 135-136.

⁷² Hughson, 'Pictish Horse Carvings', p. 54-55 and 59.

⁷³ Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-Index Of Early Irish Literature* (Indian: Indiana University Publications, 1952), p. 59. For the Salmon as the oldest and wisest in 'Culhwch and Olwen', wherein themes pre-date the ninth century, see Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 204-205. For the salmon in Pictish carvings, see Inverness Museum & Art Gallery, *A Catalogue Of The Pictish Symbol Stones At Inverness Museum & Art Gallery*, (Inverness: Inverness Museum & Art Gallery, 2010), p. 5. See also Gordon Noble, Martin Goldberg and Derek Hamilton, 'The Development Of The Pictish Symbol System: Inscribing Identity Beyond The Edges Of Empire', *Antiquity*, 92.365 (2018), 1329-1348 (pp. 1335-1336) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.68>> [accessed 2nd March 2026].

⁷⁴ Collis, *Celts And The End Of Roman Britain* [video].

complexity or history of regional style, motifs or indeed artists.⁷⁵ It is difficult to argue that a degree of cultural unity was felt between Gaels and Britons entire, beyond the pockets of coastal peoples on either side of the Irish Sea who had traded for centuries. Again, the years of Roman divide surely eradicated any sense of shared social structure or culture for the Britons and Picts. Using a linguistic shortcut potentially promotes the idea of an all-encompassing self-aware sociocultural unity that, despite obvious interaction between Britons, Gaels and Picts around borders, coastal areas or internal trade routes, does not historically appear to have existed. It infers ethnopolitical unity too, which is misleading.

In the past the main objections to generalisation about 'Celtic culture' in pre-Roman Britain was that it 'obscured real archaeological differences between Britain and the Continent' and that 'no classical author ever referred to the British tribes as Celts'.⁷⁶ Many scholars agreed that "'Celtic Britain' and 'Celtic Ireland'" were Early Modern inventions solely based on the 'linguistic connection between the Insular peoples and Continental peoples', despite the Celtic names for the islands being known to Greeks earlier than the fourth century BC.⁷⁷ More recently the idea of the people being Celtic has been reappraised. It has been proposed that Pytheas' ethnographical descriptions made on his travels are to be taken more seriously, and Strabo's bias and lack of first-hand exploration be taken into account when he discredits Pytheas' words.⁷⁸ Pytheas' expedition c. 320 BC included Britain, and he referred to the inhabitants as '*Keltoi*'.⁷⁹ This appellation was not limited to southern coastal peoples but included those in the north.⁸⁰ If the ethnonym 'Celts' can be extended to pre-Roman Britain then, can Celtic be applied to the same people a millennia later?

Despite having allegiance to the place of their birth, many Britons perceived themselves as Roman in the early fifth century. The writings of Patricius reveals how religion divided perceptions of identity. To be Christian was to be Roman, whereas the idea of the pagan was aligned with the Picts and the Scots.⁸¹ His Romanised view of the world distinguished barbarians according to ethnicity and Christians (Romans) according to region.⁸² Gildas, writing a century later, viewed Britons, Romans, Scots and Picts to be 'distinct ethnic groups', and he did not equate being a Briton with paganism, possibly because by the time he was writing conversions had occurred in all groups.⁸³ For Gildas it was 'attachment to Britain' and indigeneity that was the most important aspect of identity, but the Picts were not included in his concept of 'true and original inhabitants with a legitimate claim to possess'.⁸⁴ For Gildas the Forth-Clyde line remained a demarcation of 'other', the separation magnified to near

⁷⁵ 'Aboriginal Australia embraces a number of distinct classical or long-established artistic traditions', and the societal structures which affords artists the right to depict certain subjects are complex, see Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2025), ebook format, chapter 1.

⁷⁶ Patrick Sims-Williams, "'Celtic Britain' In Pre-Roman Archaeology", *Oxford Journal Of Archaeology*, 44.4 (2025) 446-461 (pp. 446-447).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

⁸⁰ In the fourth century BC, Hipparchus followed Pytheas' thinking, stating the 'people around latitude 54o were *Keltoi*'. Latitude 54o is in the region of York. *Ibid.*, pp. 447, 450 and 454.

⁸¹ Patrick Walden, 'British Identity In Late Antiquity And The Early Middle Ages: Some Aspects Of Continuity And Change', *Early Medieval Europe*, 30.1 (2022) 45-72 (pp. 45-46).

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

⁸³ Patricius' surviving writings, his *Confessio* and *Epistola admilites Corotici*, were written in the fifth century. Although they 'focus on the missionary activity in Ireland for which he is most famous ... they also provide some insight into his sense of identity as an inhabitant of fifth-century Britain'. Gildas' *De excidio Britanniae* was written in the sixth century. Both Patricius and Gildas wrote in Latin, which Gildas considered to be 'the language of Britons'. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

two island status by the presence of water. Gildas' idea of Britons and ethnicity survived for many centuries. What is clear is that no-one was using the term *Keltoi* in the post-Roman era for any of the people living in Britain, or at least it does not appear in any extant texts of the time.⁸⁵ One of the key elements in the reassertion of a post-Roman British identity is the native language, although it is not the only factor involved in maintaining 'late antique and medieval concepts of Britishness'.⁸⁶ However, with Pictish and Gaelic being mutually unintelligible to the Britons, the notion of a shared ethnic heritage was a concept as far removed as shared language. Retrospectively both the ethnic and linguistic connections can be deemed Celtic, but for the early medieval people there were barriers to these senses of belonging.

The 'wall' had divided the Britons from the 'Scots from the west, and the Picts from the north' during the Roman era, and nothing could prevent a clash post-occupation.⁸⁷ History rejects the notion of coherence stating that there was conflict between the Britons and those north of the wall after the Roman withdrawal and this instigated the original plea for help to Saxon mercenaries.⁸⁸ Gildas refers to the Scots and Picts as 'foreign nations', with whom there was no shared ethnic or political identity.⁸⁹ The Britons sought political allies elsewhere and agreed to the Saxons taking land in the north near the wall if they defeated their enemies, ultimately engineering their own invasion.⁹⁰ In the *Gododdin*, a Pictish warrior is mentioned alongside the fated Britons of Yr Hen Ogledd (The Old North) at the Battle of Catraeth c. 600 AD against the Angles, but beyond that, in tales and records, the Picts and Britons do not present a united front against the Germanic forces.⁹¹ Animosity between them mostly continued after the Roman era and the *Annales Cambriae* refers to the 'battle of *Mocetauc*' between the Britons and the Picts in 750 AD, which resulted in the death of the Pictish king.⁹² The Picts and Gaels did not live in peace either, despite being accused of cooperating in attacks south of the wall as early as the late fourth century: the *barbarica conspirator* (barbarian conspiracy) occurred in 367 AD.⁹³ The Dál Riata had their mind on expansion into Pictish territory, and the Picts may have even had their first Gaelic king as early as the late sixth century.⁹⁴ Tensions between the two were recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*, including Aedán's expedition to the Orkneys in 580 AD and a 'battle

⁸⁵ It should be noted that 'Celtic' when appearing in the translation notes for writers such as Bede, does not appear in the Latin original or in the body of the translated text. Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*.

⁸⁶ Walden, 'British Identity In Late Antiquity And The Early Middle Ages', pp. 45-46.

⁸⁷ *Historia Brittonum*, 23 and 38.

⁸⁸ 'The Britons who, suspecting no hostilities, were unprovided with the means of defence, were unanimously and incessantly attacked, both by the Scots from the west, and by the Picts from the north.' *Historia Brittonum*, 15 and 30-31.

⁸⁹ Gildas states the Britons were 'ignorant in the art of war' after the Romans left, depriving them of 'soldiery and armed bands'. Britain 'groaned in amazement for many years under the cruelty of two foreign nations—the Scots from the north-west, and the Picts from the north'. Gildas, *On The Ruin Of Britain*, trans. by J. A. Giles (1999), 14 <<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1949/pg1949-images.html>> [accessed 4th March 2026].

⁹⁰ 'The incautious sovereign having assented to this, Octa and Ebusa arrived with forty ships. In these they sailed round the country of the Picts, laid waste the Orkneys, and took possession of many regions, even to the Pictish confines.' *Historia Brittonum*, 38.

⁹¹ In the *Gododdin*, one warrior, 'Cian's only son' is from 'beyond Bannawg'. Koch, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, pp. 296-299 and 311. For Bannawg (Bannockburn) (*bannauc* – hill (Brythonic) and *burn* - stream (Gaelic), which puts the 'beyond' in Pictish territory. 'This stream-name preserves the hill-name regularly used in mediaeval Welsh literature to define the boundary between the Britons of the Old North and the Picts'. Alan G. James, *The Brittonic Language In The Old North: A Guide To The Place-Name Evidence, Vol 2: Dictionary*, (Scottish Place Name Society, 2025) p. 22.

⁹² David N. Dumville, *Annales Cambriae, A.D. 682-954: Texts A-C In Parallel*, ed. and trans. by David N. Dumville, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2002), p. 6.

⁹³ Hudson, *The Picts*, p. 27.

⁹⁴ Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*, p. 39

in Foirtriu between Aed and Cinaed' in 768 AD, and the Picts also gained control of the dominant Gaelic kingship between 741 and 750 AD.⁹⁵ The Gaels and the Picts were united under Kenneth MacAlpin in 843 AD, eventually overcoming Britons in Strathclyde some years later under his grandson, forming the basis of what is known as Scotland today.⁹⁶

Celtic was as good a label as any for the language branch discovered by the early modern linguists. It transmits the shared insular and continental roots of a prehistoric people. Three different languages of this branch were spoken by Britons, Gaels and Picts, all of which were mutually unintelligible during the early middle ages, however Celtic is a clear and apt assignation for their languages as a group. In this way Celtic is a modern retrospective construct which gathers people in a linguistic sense. The people of Britain might have been known as *Keltoi* in antiquity, but during the Middle Ages, Celt was a long past ethnonym. The Picts and Britons do share the same heritage, and the Gaels too are considered Celtic, but different ethnic boundaries were well established by the end of the Roman occupation. Culturally and socially the term is only appropriate to a certain degree of specificity and is lazy when it erases individual group expression. It is useful when it aids comparison of the grouping as a whole with wider external groups. The area of political identity is where the term Celtic falls down completely. There is no narrative of solidarity between all three groups, and the contrary is evidenced via their battles for supremacy and territory.

Whether Celtic is an appropriate term for Britons, Gaels and Picts, very much depends on the context and whether a more precise term would convey an accurate representation. 'Celtic-speaking' is possibly useful in certain contexts considering their lack of self-identification as Celtic. The circumstances under which Celtic itself is helpful or suitable label for recounting information about them could be simplified as: fully acceptable when discussing language and their ancestral or ethnographic heritage; partially acceptable with regard to culture and social values; and rarely, if ever, for their self-titled or political identity. Celtic used wrongly reduces awareness of unique properties and constituent parts of specific aspects of group identity, but it does have its place in discourse about Britons, Gaels and Picts in the early Middle Age.

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⁹⁵ CELT: Corpus Of Electronic Texts 'The Annals of Ulster', *CELT: Corpus Of Electronic Texts* (2020) <<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100001A.html>> [accessed 7th March 2026]. For the Picts control of a Dál Riata territory, see Sally M. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots: Early Historic Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2014), p. 38.

⁹⁶ Christopher A. Snyder, *The Britons* (Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 220-221.

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